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ABSTRACT

Although spoken language was the subject of attention among Soviet linguists for a short period in the 1920s, it has not attracted much attention since then. The main concern of Soviet linguists has been the forms of written language. Only at the end of the 1960s did linguists begin to record spontaneous speech on tape and study its forms. The impetus came partly from literature, where a young generation of writers produced "living speech" that no traditional grammar could account for. The studies of Russian impromptu speech have mostly concentrated on syntax, since that is where the greatest differences have been found in comparison with written language. (Author/MSE)

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THE STUDY OF RUSSIAN IMPROMPTU SPEECH IN SOVIET LINGUISTICS

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The study of Russian impromptu speech in Soviet linguistics

Abstract: The paper presents a critical survey of the studies of spoken Russian that have appeared in the Soviet Union during the last fifteen years. Having been the subject of attention for a short period in the 1920s, spoken language has not attracted much interest among Soviet linguists, whose main concern has been the forms of written language. Only at the end of the 1960s did linguists begin to record spontaneous speech on tape and study its forms. The incitement came partly from literature, where a young generation of writers reproduced 'living speech' that no traditional grammar could account for. The studies of Russian impromptu speech have mostly concentrated on syntax, since that is where the greatest differences have been found in comparison with written language.

In 1962 a brochure was published in Alma-Ata, in which the idea was put forth that the Russian language should be studied as it appeared 'in the use of its speakers'. Attention should be given to changes that had taken place during the Soviet period, linguists should again focus on the relation between society and language. This was the first time since the 1920s that social factors and society were recognized as essential to the development of language. In the first decade after the revolution there had been lively and deversified discussions on linguistic matters, but in the 1930s linguists had turned to a normative model of Russian based solely on written language, so that many concrete manifestations of language were ignored. The Russian language was then characterized as 'uniform' (*edinyj*) and 'monolithic' (*monolitnyj*), with a standard phonology, morphology and syntax. All forms not fitting into the model were regarded as deviations, and as such were not to be considered or explained but were rather to be uprooted through education. Russian linguistics became quite abstract, and the cleavage between how people spoke and what the linguists studied was considerable.

In the beginning of the 1960s a young generation of prose writers (Vasily Aksyonov and others) introduced a new prose style into Russian literature. They imitated colloquial speech in their works, with the result that slang

words, syntactic fragmentation and weakened grammatical connections appeared in print. Since no traditional, normative grammar could account for such phenomena, an expansion of the field of study was called for and attention was turned to oral speech.

It is interesting to note that the study of spoken Russian does not begin in the center of the country (linguistic institutions in Moscow) but on the periphery. A group of linguists at the university of Saratov started discussing the concept of 'colloquial style, style of spoken language' that linguists had used for decades without ever clearly defining it. It seemed to many that the 'style of spoken language' could not be compared to different literary styles (journalistic style, the style of scientific publications, etc.). In 1962 a series of publications (*Voprosy stilistiki*) was started at the university of Saratov, in which forms of spoken language were studied and discussed. Although the object of study was **oral** speech, the Saratov linguists used written sources to begin with (dialogues from literary works, newspaper genres like the 'feuilleton' – a satirical chat on various matters). Not until the late 1960s did they begin tape-recording spontaneous speech.

The first samples of tape-recorded impromptu Russian to appear in print are found in a Czech publication (Československá rusistika 2, 1965). Influenced by their own linguistic tradition, Czech linguists were more attentive to this form of language, and Czech researchers of Russian had tape-recorded Russian speech in Moscow, analyzed it and presented samples of it before the Russian linguists began their studies.

A third impulse to study spoken Russian came from teachers of foreign languages in the Soviet Union. In 1963 a conference was held in Irkutsk on the 'Specific Structure of Oral Speech' (the proceedings were published in 1963 and 1964). This conference was followed by several others in Gorkij (*Teorija i praktika lingvističeskogo opisanija razgovornoj reči*, 1966, 1968, 1972). Thanks to these conferences Russian linguists became familiar with the problems related to the study of impromptu speech in other languages.

At the end of the 1960s linguists at the Russian Language Institute in Moscow began taperecording impromptu speech. By then the Russian term *razgovornaja reč'* was used in different meanings (Zemskaja 1970:3):

1) any oral speech (*ustnaja reč'*)
2) the oral speech of city dwellers (*ustnaja gorodskaja reč'*)

3) the colloquial speech of city and countryside dwellers (*bytovaja reč'*)
4) spontaneous, impromptu speech of people speaking standard Russian.

The Moscow linguists opted for the fourth definition. For practical reasons the recordings were made among the friends and families of the linguists themselves, i.e. among educated people. The speakers were city people (born in urban areas) with no traces of dialect: they had all finished high school (10 years), and many had completed their higher education (5-9 years). Thus a certain uniformity ('celostnaja, edinaja sistema') of speech was attained. All speakers knew standard, literary Russian.

So far no recordings have been made among workers or people in the service sector (shop assistants, drivers, waiters etc.), nor has anything been done among peasants and people working in the countryside (besides traditional dialect studies). In the 1920s there were several projects to study the speech of various social groups, but none of them were ever realized. A plan to study 'the speech of the workers' (Polivanov 1968:53) apparently stayed on that level. In Leningrad a group of students under the supervision of the linguist Boris Larin began recording the social dialects of the city in the middle of the 1920s, but their material has unfortunately not been preserved. Larin was also interested in slang, jargons and other 'uncodified' forms of language – a field not studied since (Larin 1977:213). All interest in the speech of different social groups, as well as the idea that changes in language depended on changes in the ruling social group, had become inconvenient by the end of the 1920s, when a monistic view of language became dominant. Some dialectologists had, however, noted that spoken language in some respects differed from the written forms of language. In a work published as early as 1915 Lev Ščerba pointed out that the primary form of spoken language was **dialogue**, and that this accounted for special structural features. His idea was developed in an article by Lev Jakubinskij (1923) who also emphasized the close relation between the speech situation and the forms of language used. These ideas were again brought into the foreground in the 1960s.

In 1973 the results of the Moscow linguists, directed by E.A. Zemskaja, were published in a monograph (*Russkaja razgovornaja reč'*) structured as a grammar of spoken Russian with sections on phonetics, morphology and syntax. A rudimentary chapter on gesture was also included. Although many forms of oral speech were identical with written speech, the linguists still

thought it proper to speak of a different **system**, since the forms functioned in a different context with a different 'set of rules'. Much attention was thus given the **situation** in which the speech was uttered. Three criteria were considered necessary for impromptu speech:

1) the speaker is unprepared and speaks spontaneously;
2) the speaker is in immediate contact with the listener/s;
3) the atmosphere is relaxed (*neprinuždennyj*).

Zemskaja emphasizes the last criterion but gives no clear definition of it. She says the atmosphere is relaxed when the relations between the speaker and the listener are 'unofficial' (*neoficial'nye*). She further states that the concept of 'unofficial relations' is 'intuitively clear to everyone' (Zemskaja 1970:7).

Such a puzzling statement demands a short excursion into the ethnography of speaking in the Soviet Union, a field into which no linguists have thus far ventured. We must remember that all speeches in front of an audience – be it a small meeting in one's place of employment or a speech delivered from a tribune to hundreds of people – are considered **public** and as such subject to different kinds of control mechanisms. In the mass media, for instance, every appearance has to pass a board of censors and must therefore either be prepared in advance or approved of afterwards, i.e. before it reaches the audience. In Zemskaja's words: 'It is obvious that mass communication takes place only in literary language' (Zemskaja 1970:6). Most public statements are therefore written beforehand and the Russian one hears at public appearances (even if the speaker does not read his speech) has features of typical written language, often with stilted bureaucratic locutions (participles, verbal adverbs etc.). This situation has affected the speech behaviour of people in general. Many have developed something of a Pavlovian reflex: as soon as the situation approaches that of a public appearance it becomes 'official' in the mind of the speaker, who consequently begins structuring his speech according to the rules of formal, literary language. A third person entering a room in which two friends are talking might be enough to cause the situation to turn 'official'. The same is true if the speaker knows that his speech is being recorded, which makes tape-recording of impromptu speech difficult in many instances (Nikol'skij 1968:394). The rules governing this behaviour are

apparently quite complex ('intuitively clear to everyone'!) and present an interesting field of study. One of the Saratov linguists gives an example of a 74-year old kolkhoznik who when speaking to an outsider on the state of a field strives to make his speech 'educated' (*kul'turnyj*) by inserting literary clichés into it (Sirotinina 1974:72-73):

> *Čistyj par. Da... Ego, značit, na god otložim. Vse èto* ***predvaritel'no*** *vspašem. Sejčas ego vspaxali, a potom èto* ***v izvestnyj period****, ponimaete li, tak skazat', projdet.*
> 'Bare fallow. Yes... I mean, we leave it for a year. We give it all a preliminary ploughing. It has just been ploughed and then for a certain period of time, you understand, time passes, so to say.'

Because the peasant tries to use 'educated' words with which he is unfamiliar, he is forced to put several fillers into his speech: *značit, ponimaete li, tak skazat'* (Sirotinina gives the example as an illustration of the use of fillers). Olga Lapteva, another researcher of impromptu speech, gives a similar example. A worker at a metro station gives an order to passengers stepping on the escalator (Lapteva 1976:317):

> *Graždane!* ***Pri vxode na*** *eskalator / kogda vy vxodite pobystree nado proxodit' ne zaderživajtes'!*
> 'Citizens! On entering the escalator / when you get on you must get on faster don't be so slow!'

Aware that he is speaking publicly, the speaker begins his sentence with the bureaucratic *pri vxode* found only in written instructions, but he cannot follow through in this style and repeats the same thing in normal words: *kogda vy vxodite.*

When the Russian linguists first listened to the tapes of their own impromptu speech many were shocked and refused to believe they spoke in such a 'disorderly way'. So strong was the impact of written language and standard grammar. What especially struck them was the great syntactic difference between written and oral speech. Two different opinions were voiced among the linguists:

- impromptu speech is characterized by a number of forms and constructions specific to oral utterances, or
- there are no specific constructions but impromptu speech is a totally different mode of organizing utterances.

A representative of the first opinion, Olga Lapteva, published in 1976 a work entitled *The Syntax of Spoken Russian (Russkij razgovornyj sintaksis)* in which she describes a number of syntactic constructions in colloquial Russian that differ from standard, literary Russian. She classifies the constructions into 6 different models with variants and thus enlarges the inventory of known syntactic forms in Russian. Her method of classification, however, is the same as for written language – little or no attention is paid to the play between syntax and intonation in the shaping of the utterances. Lapteva also admits that she takes into account only 'typified constructions' (*tipizirovannye konstrukcii*), i.e. constructions of high frequency in her material, and ignores everything that is 'loosely formed' (*slabo-oformlennoe*). In Lapteva's view most impromptu speech is chaotic and unorganized and therefore defies classification.

But let us take a look at one of Lapteva's 'loosely formed' utterances: *Ty tam ne blizko vannoj svet?* It consists of the semantic units 'you', 'near', 'bathroom', 'light'. The utterance is completely understandable in the **situation** in which it is said, despite its syntactic deficiences: the listener understands that the speaker wants light in the bathroom. To make this utterance acceptable in standard Russian we could say: *Esli ty blizko, zažgi svet v vannoj!* or *Esli ty blizko ot vannoj, zažgi tam svet!* The implicit verb is made explicit, the relations between the units are determined more clearly, but the utterance is made longer and more cumbersome. It appears that the syntax of literary Russian defines the relations between the units more precisely, while the syntactic vagueness of spoken utterances make them more flecible and economical.

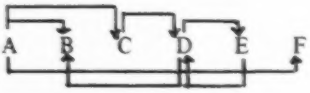
One of the weaknesses of Lapteva's study is that the utterances are isolated from their context – indications of context are given only when the utterance would be completely incomprehensible without them. Lapteva is in fact studying oral speech **as if** it were written. This becomes clear when she classifies an elliptical utterance like *A gde avos'ka zdes' ležala*? into main and subordinate clauses (model D). *A gde avos'ka zdes' ležala* is considered to

be a transformation of literary, standard *A gde avos'ka, **kotoraja** zdes' ležala?* One could just as well claim that it is an example of 'overlapping' (model E in Lapteva's system): *A gde avos'ka/avos'ka zdes' ležala?* The characteristic feature of spoken syntax is precisely the lack of clearly defined relations between the units. Thus a heavier load is put on semantics and context for the interpretation. If the researcher **define**s the relations – through the screen of written language – he distorts his object of study. Lapteva's study does not present any overall view of the syntactic structure of spoken Russian, but limits itself to a few constructions. The same is true of the monograph *Russkaja razgovornaja reč'*, published by the Russian Language Institute.

Boris Gasparov is a representative of the second opinion, which treats oral speech as a totally different mechanism from written speech. In an article (Gasparov 1978a) he considers impromptu speech in the larger context of oral versus written communication, which he even goes so far as to define as two different forms of culture. He criticizes the opinion which many linguists derive from their experience of classifying written language that oral utterances are chaotic and unorganized, and emphasizes the positive character of oral speech. He warns against using classificatory models developed for written speech on oral utterances.

> The specific structure of oral texts manifests itself in expressly 'oral' phrases, grammatical constructions, and so on, but it also manifests itself at a higher level – by specifically oral means of unfolding a speech sequence and expressing its message. The basic composition of the written text is a linear structure: the sequence of thematic units is controlled by a set of rules, and the composition of the whole text is determined by a rigid order of units, for each thematic unit has its own function which determines its position in the entire structure. Oral communication calls for a different structure, for a speaker cannot compose his speech according to a complicated set of rules. By its very nature, oral communication does not tolerate rigid linear structures. Moreover, a speaker enjoys means of expression which a writer does not have: melodic and rhythmical devices, gestures and facial expressions. The speaker continuously employs these means, and with their help creates a non-linear structure – a text which unfolds simultaneously along several channels, as it were. Therefore, the chief typological feature that distinguishes the oral from the written text is its non-linear character. (Gasparov 1978b: 15)

Since the flow of speech is irreversible (*neobratimest' reči*) the grammatical structure of oral utterances depends heavily on the functioning of our operative memory – connections between units are made only insofar as they can be kept in mind. Adjustments and corrections do not change this fundamental fact, they just add to what has already been said. During the speech act the speaker and the listener each make a prognosis of how the utterance is to unfold, but the plan is rough and approximate: theme, time sequence, mode. It is impossible to establish all syntactic and semantic connections between the units of oral speech. As soon as the utterance exceeds what can be kept in mind, the connections become looser; only relations between contiguous elements are clearly defined, whence the lack of grammatical coordination typical of impromptu speech. In written speech, connections can be made between distant units – the reader need merely go back and re-read the text. In oral speech every new element in the speech flow relates, as it were, to the sum total of what has been said before. The difference between oral and written speech could be schematized as follows (Gasparov 1978a:75):

written: 

oral: A ⇒ /A/B ⇒ /AB/C ⇒ /ABC/D ⇒ /ABCD/E ⇒ /ABCDE/F

The syntactic structure of impromptu speech is more like a 'stringing' (*nanizyvanie*) of associations than a logical unfolding of the theme (an opinion also voiced by Sirotinina 1974:122). Only some relations are fixed, and the elements form a conglomerate from which the meaning emerges through comparison and confrontation among the semantic units.

> The thematic unfolding of the text is not achieved by a direct logical sequence of units; rather, as the theme develops, certain units – or their parts – keep reappearing or recurring, and thus form thematic circles as it were. The units within the circles can be compared to parentheses or asides. The reappearance of a theme, its variations and repetitions, create a fragmented but fuller and more complex representation of the speaker's ideas. (Gasparov 1978b:17)

While most Russian linguists limit their study of oral speech to the syntax of the sentence, or equivalent, Gasparov goes beyond it and outlines a structure of oral texts. Syntactic phenomena observed within isolated utterances are found to be repeated on higher levels, in the structure of big blocks of oral messages.

Syntactic features of Russian impromptu speech

1) Inversions and disrupted constructions.

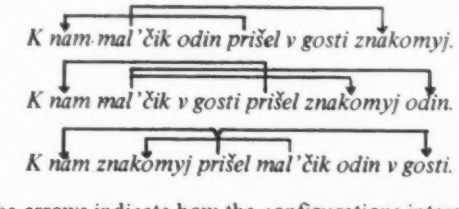
Gasparov characterizes the structure of impromptu speech with the agrarian term *čerespolosica* (approximately 'strip holding', as in the 19th-century peasant commune system): parts that belong together are thrown apart, elements of different constructions wedge into each other, stable word combinations are broken up. A sentence like *Knižku ja včera pročital interesnuju očen'* (standard *Ja včera pročital očen' interesnuju knižku*), in which the expression *očen' interesnuju knižku* has been broken up and each part thrown to the margin of the sentence, is most natural in spoken Russian. If we take the sentence (Gasparov 1978a:76-77)

Odin znakomyj mal'čik prišel k nam v gosti.

the listener immediately interprets it as literary – a sentence learned by heart, the beginning of a story, etc. – and would never expect it in impromptu speech. To make it acceptable for spontaneous speech the following transformation can be made:

K nam v gosti prišel odin mal'čik znakomyj.

But even more radical changes can be made which not only do not make the sentence more difficult to grasp, but on the contrary make it more natural in oral speech:


K nam mal'čik odin prišel v gosti znakomyj.
K nam mal'čik v gosti prišel znakomyj odin.
K nam znakomyj prišel mal'čik odin v gosti.

(The arrows indicate how the configurations intersect.)

Since the word order in Russian is comparatively free, we find a great variety of syntactic configurations in impromptu speech. In the utterance *S krasnen'kim sobačku požalujsta bantikom dajte!* (standard: *Dajte požalujsta sobačku s krasnen'kim bantikom*) **all** the word groups (*s krasnen'kim • bantikom / dajte • sobačku / dajte • požalujsta*) have been broken up and thrown around (Russkaja razgovornaja rec' 1973:391).

In spoken Russian there is a general tendency to move important information towards the beginning of the sentence: *Interesnyj prinesli žurnal* versus standard *Prinesli interesnyj žurnal.* This gives impromptu speech a different sentence perspective from literary Russian. In literary Russian the word order is used for the logical organization of the text according to the principle: from given to new information. In impromptu speech we find the opposite: the new is often stated first, while the given is added at the end or even left out: *Vse **doklady** pišut* versus standard *Vse pišut **doklady*** (Sirotinina 1974: 123). Lapteva even questions whether it is possible to classify the information in all spoken utterances into 'given' and 'new'. She prefers to talk about 'information centres' (*informativnye centry*), information clusters, some of which bear more weight than others (Lapteva 1976:1976:187-189, 243-257). The 'loaded' words are always in strong positions intonationally:

*Tjaželye u nas **veščі** vse-taki.*

*Èto očen' **zamančivaja** dlja menja byla **mysl'**.* (Lapteva 1976:188)

2) Breaks, pauses, fillers.

In impromptu speech we find a number of words without meaning whose function is to fill the pauses when the speaker looks for words or prepares what he is going to say next (*vot, nu, značit, voobšče, v obščem, sobstvenno govorja, tak skazat', konečno, èto samoe*): ***Vot nu** prosto ona **tak vot** ne mogla navernoe udelit' mne vnimanie.* (Russkaja razgovornaja rec' 1970:116). These words have been studied, mostly quantitatively, but, as Gasparov claims, their positive role has not been recognized. Many linguists take an outright negative view of them, regarding them as 'parasitic'. It seems probable that their function is not only to 'fill up' but also to cancel semantic

and grammatical obligations and thus make it easier for the speaker to begin anew at any point in the speech flow: *Pošli my raz, **nu znaeš'** na uglu, **tam vot** ešče gastronom rjadom, **vot značit** kiosk takoj* (Gasparov 1978a:78). Fillers appear even when the speaker has prepared his speech. In this case they give the listener a possibility to pause and let the information sink in. From the listener's point of view they can thus be compared to repetitions and variations.

3) Activation of common cases.

In spoken Russian a word is often emphasized by being 'picked out' and moved to the beginning of the utterance. In such a position it is not declined but appears in the nominative (infinitive if a verb). This construction is standard in all kinds of everyday questions – the important part of the question/request is 'thrown out' first:

***Kniga ėta** – gde pokupali?* vs standard *Gde pokupali ėtu knigu?*
***Ulica** Gogolja – kak projti?* vs standard *Kak projti na ulicu Gogolja?*
***Biblioteka** Lenina – sojdete?* vs standard *Vy sojdete u biblioteki Lenina?*
***Kolbasa** za dva-dvadcat' – mne trista gramm, požalujsta!* vs standard *Požalujsta, dajte mne trista gramm kolbasy za dva-dvadcat'!*

Sometimes the emphasized word is repeated by a declined pronoun:

*A **gus'**, vy budete sup varit' **iz nego**?*

If the emphasized word is a verb, the pronoun *ėto* referring to the action generally appears in the second part of the utterance:

***Pis'mo napisat' – ėto** ja zavtra.*
***Obeščat' – ėto** on umeet.*

Such constructions increase the syntactic fragmentation of spoken utterances. Bits of information are **stringed** to each other without the grammatical coordination characteristic of literary speech.

All the above-mentioned operations (inversions, disrupted constructions, fillers, undeclined words) make for a freer syntax, a stringing of independent units, that corresponds to the mobility in the speaker's train of thought. The syntax of impromptu speech brings together lexical items in ways unknown to literary syntax and includes the possibility of alternative relationships (Gasparov 1978a: 79):

Pirožki svežie / tol'ko čto kupila / na uglu magazin / svežie takie.
'Fresh pastries / I bought (them) just now / there is a / the shop on the corner / real fresh ones.'

If we change this string of fragments into a literary phrase, we can have:

1) *Kakie svežie pirožki ja kupila tol'ko čto v magazine na uglu!*
2) *Èti pirožki takie svežie – ved' ja ix tol'ko čto kupila v magazine na uglu.*
3) *Èti pirožki takie svežie – ved' ja ix tol'ko čto, na uglu, kupila v magazine.*

However, none of these variants render the exact meaning of the spoken utterance. In (1) the indication of time (*tol'ko čto*) and place (*v magazine na uglu*) are not directly related to the freshness of the pastries. in (2) and (3) the modifiers (*tol'ko čto, v magazine na uglu*) explain why the pastries are fresh but lose the demonstrative role they have in the impromptu utterance.

Researchers of Russian impromptu speech agree that the meaning in spoken utterances is created more by the juxtaposition (confrontation and comparison) of semantic units than by grammatical relations between the units (Gasparov 1978a:91; Russkaja razgovornaja rec' 1973:402). An impromptu utterance put on paper often appears vague. The reader has to make an effort to interpret it – an effort that consists in recreating the situation it was uttered in and giving the words the right intonation. Unfortunately most Russian impromptu speech available to foreigners is in written form. In 1978 an interesting collection of texts was published by the Russian Language Institute in Moscow. However, one must be thankful that studies of this form of speech have begun and are continuing, even if the number of linguists

working in the field is small. One can only hope that this work might be followed by studies of linguistic behaviour (*rečevoe povedenie*) and the ethnography of speaking, not to mention slang and social dialects.

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